

Notes from care home online forum – Monday 9 May 2022

Participants: 3 attendees, 3 HWN staff members and Alan Curry, Senior Manager – Commissioning, Northumberland County Council

Hosted by Derry Nugent (DN)

DN opened the forum and introduced Alan Curry (AC).

Alan Curry update

AC explained his role at Northumberland County Council. He manages the contracts with care homes and other social care providers. He said the two main issues in care homes right now are high levels of Covid infections and workforce issues (both through Covid and staff recruitment/retention issues). Home care services have been badly affected by staffing shortages too. AC has received less enquiries recently and feels the situation with care homes is calmer now than it was during the last two years of the pandemic.

There have been changes in visiting guidance since April 2022. There is no legal need for visitors to test for Covid unless delivering personal care, in which case the visitor should do two LFTs a week and wear PPE. This should be done in advance at home rather than at the care home. Visiting professionals and inspectors should test negative within 72 hours of visiting the care home. Residents should isolate if they test positive or are discharged from a hospital with an outbreak.

AC noted that there is some local variation in the visiting practices, for example care homes belonging to a larger national group may not be able to be as flexible as privately-owned care homes due to their national guidelines or policies.

Hospitals are under pressure with Covid admissions and some homes are reluctant to take Covid patients after being discharged from hospital. NCC is seeking to establish which care homes take residents after a negative test on day 5 rather than after 14 days. Some care homes will have insurance issues around the risks of taking Covid patients.

DN asked AC to clarify what 'personal care' includes. He said it covers eating support, helping to dress, wash, shave etc.

Current experiences of the group

One attendee said she helps her husband eat and tries to cut his hair. She has continued to test and wears a mask but has not been asked to wear a PPE apron. She feels anxious about the risk of Covid due to relaxed testing rules. There is often no staff member there when she visits and she goes straight up to her husband's room. She is finding it difficult to get her husband's hair cut. AC suggested asking to speak to the care manager or social worker as this must be a common situation and should be part of her husband's care plan. One attendee suggested emailing the care home manager to book a meeting in advance to discuss her husband's needs. We talked about how a relative shouldn't feel like they are on their own and Healthwatch is here to offer support with any issues that arise.

Another attendee said her mum's home, which is part of the Barchester group, likes to greet all visitors and sign them in. She says the home is relying on visitors to take responsibility for their own tests. She is currently visiting once or twice a week.

DN raised the issue of the difficulties partially sighted people may have doing their own LFT at home rather than at the care home. The new paid-for LFTs don't have a barcode to register the result online so will need to be taken into the care home as evidence of a negative result.

Questions for Alan

One attendee asked if the council does block-booking of beds in care homes and how quality is monitored.

AC said the council had block-booked contracts during the pandemic as it was easier for them to arrange this than it would've been for the NHS during the pandemic. Professional inspectors keep a check on the quality and when issues are spotted, they are addressed individually. During the pandemic care homes didn't have the same scrutiny without people going in to visit so they are expecting some quality issues to come up but are looking at increasing the monitoring of care homes as we come out of the pandemic.

How is infection control being monitored?

There is a much closer relationship with the Infection Control Team now. The CQC has been monitoring infection control much more closely and NCC will continue to do so as well.

One attendee said she had been impressed by the standards of infection control post-pandemic. This will be a key issue to focus on going forward.

Have you been hearing much about visits from dentists, chiropodists, opticians etc.?

AC said he hadn't heard much about this but has heard about the wider issue of difficulties accessing dentistry, not just in care homes. Anyone who has any particular issues can get in touch